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ABSTRACT

Following a brief discussion of the history of Yiddish children's literature, which is said to have come into existence as a separate literary form at the beginning of the twentieth century and to have ended in 1939, this paper presents 12 Yiddish nursery rhymes in Yiddish and in English translations. The rhymes are divided into four categories: folk and street songs, literary poems, message poems, and visionary poems. Notes are included that explain various aspects of the language and content of many of the rhymes. (GT)

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THE YIDDISH NURSERY RHYME

by Dr. Eric A. Kimmel

This talk has absolutely no practical application to anything happening in American interest today, but talks like that are often the most interesting. Let me begin by telling you how I became interested in Yiddish nursery rhymes.

Some years ago I was working with my friend Mrs. Rose Zar of South Bend, Indiana on a book about her experiences during the war. I have always had an interest in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, reading and speaking both languages, though hardly fluently. During a break in our taping, Mrs. Zar asked me if I had ever heard any Yiddish children's rhymes. I hadn't. I must confess that I didn't know there were any. I had never seen any published or translated. I asked Mrs. Zar to tell me a few. She did, and I immediately realized I had stumbled on a treasure trove. The Yiddish nursery rhyme is a lost traditional form. The rhymes and songs perished with the children during the forties. Little writing for children is done in Yiddish today simply because so few Jewish children speak the language. Most of the surviving literary material from Europe remains uncatalogued.

When Mrs. Zar was growing up in Poland, the nursery

rhyme was alive and flourishing. Groups of children were always playing and singing in the alleys, streets and courtyards of the Jewish quarters. In addition, her aunt was a kindergarten teacher--one of the first in Poland--who had a special interest in children's songs and games. As a teacher, Mrs. Zar maintained her interest in children well into adulthood. All these factors combined to make her an excellent source.

I have been collecting and translating Yiddish nursery rhymes for two years. The collection is small, but unique. Before sharing it with you, I'd like to first give you some background about them and about Yiddish children's literature in general.

Children's literature as a separate literary form does not come into existence in Yiddish until the beginning of the twentieth century, although collections of traditional stories, Hasidic tales, and short stories were often published in children's editions. The first important piece specifically composed for children was Sholem Aleichem's masterful story "Dos Meserl" (The Penknife) which appeared in 1888. We can consider that date as the start of Yiddish children's literature. Within a few years it was flourishing. All the major Yiddish and Hebrew writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century--Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Abraham Reisen, Chaim Nachman Bialik--contributed poems ans stories to a host of little magazines and journals

published for children. Poland, Russia, and to a lesser extent Rumania and the United States, all became centers of Yiddish children's publishing. The end came in 1939, when the dying out of Yiddish in the U.S., the murder of the Polish Jews, and the ravages of Stalinization all brought about the end of a once vibrant culture.

Looking at this small sample--admittedly only a fragment of what was, though probably including many of the most famous pieces--we find a number of characteristics common to all nursery rhymes. These are a heavy emphasis on rhyme and rhythm, and lines that often seem put together more for the sake of sound than sense. These particular poems tend to fall into three groups: folk and street songs; literary compositions; and message poems. I have included a transliteration of the Yiddish text to give a sense of the sound of the originals.

-FOLK AND STREET SONGS-

Nonsense Song

Pins have heads,
But they can't think.
Needles have eyes,
But they can't blink.
Tables have legs,
But they can't walk.
Jars have mouths,
But they can't talk.
Pillows have feathers,
But they aren't birds.
And birds can sing,
Though they don't know the words.

Narishkeiten

A shpilke hot a kop
Ober ken nisht kleren.
A nudel hot an oyer
Ober ken nisht heren.
A tish hot fies
Ober ken nisht gayn.
A chaynik hot a moil,
Ober nisht kein tzayn.
Kishen hoben federen;
Zeinen nisht kein foigel.
Netzen hoben lekhen,
Zeinen nisht kein baygel.

Riddle Song

Beautiful maiden, maiden so fine,
Answer this riddle, this riddle of mine.
What is tall, taller than the house?
What is quick, quicker than a mouse?
Where is a sea without any strand?
Where is a king without any land?

The chimney is tall, taller than the house.
A cat is quick, quicker than a mouse.
The tear in your eye is a sea without strand.
The king in the cards is a king without land.

* This song appears in many versions. It is often found as a love song. The young man asked the maiden what can grow without rain, what can burn and not be consumed, and what can weep without tears. The answers are a stone, love, and a heart. But children would probably be more interested in the cat and the mouse.

Retinishlied

O maydele zieses, o maydel du sheins,
Ich vil dir fraygen a retinish, a feins.
Vos iz hekher, hekher vi der hoiz?
Vos iz flinker, flinker vi die moiz?
Vu iz a yam un a zamt?
Vu iz a kaynig un a lant?

Der koimen iz hekher, hekher vi dos hoiz.
Die katz iz flinker, flinker vi die moiz.
Dos vasser in die oygen iz un a zamt.
Der kaynig fun die karten iz un a lant.

Lullabye

Ayle-lu-lu. Ayle-lu-lu.
Sleep, my baby, do.
Lucky the child whc has a mama
And a cradle too.

Men can buy what they desire,
Pay for it with precious gold.
But where to buy a loving Mama?
Mama's worth is wealth untold.

Viegeleslied

Ayle-lu-lu. Ayle-lu-lu.
Shlof mein tayere in ruh.
Voil is dem vos hot a maman
Un a viegele der tzu.

Alle tzding ken men noch gefinen.
Alle tzding kricht men nor fun gelt.
Nor a mama iz eine,
Mehr nisht eine oif der velt.

-LITERARY POEMS-

Berel, Shmerel

Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
On the carousel.
Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
Tumbling pell-mell.

One foot here and one foot there,
All about they slide.
Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
When you're riding, RIDE!

Berel, Shmerel

Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
Fahrt oif die karozele.
Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
Hoibn oif tzu shpielen.

A fus aheen, a fus aher,
Oif'n ferd geriten.
Berel, Shmerel, hop, hop, hop,
Az reiten iz geriten!

Little Tsipi

One day, while running carelessly,
Tsipi fell and skinned her knee.
"Tsipi, what's the matter?
Will an apple make it better?"

"No, no, no!
Who says I'm crying so?"

She gives her head a shake.
It makes her pigtails quake.
"Tsipi, are you crying?
Will <u>two</u> apples stop your sighing?"

"No, no, no!
A kiss I do need, though."

* In the original, Tsipi bites her lip. The suffix "ele" functions as a diminutive. I was unable to translate that rhyme exactly without making it sound hopelessly silly, which it isn't in Yiddish--"Little Tsipi bit her lippy." "Knee" conveys the sense of the original better.

Kleine Tsipele

Az hot dos kleine Tsipele
Gebeizen zich dos lipele.
"Tsipele, vas veins du?
An apele dos meins du?"

"Nein, nein, nein.
Vehr zogs az ich wein?"

Es treiselt sizh ihr kepele
Un reinen mit dem tzepele.

"Tsipele, vas veins du?
Tzvei apelech dos meins du?"

"Nein, nein, nein.
Ich vil a kush un nisht mein."

The Lady and the Poodle

An elegant lady comes down to the train
With a pack and a sack, an umbrella for rain,
A satchel as thin as a noodle,
And on top of it all, a cute little poodle.

The man in the ticket booth knows what to do.
He writes out her ticket and stamps it in blue.
The train gives a whistle. The poodle takes fright.
It jumps out the door and is soon out of sight.

Oh what a clamor! Oh what a din!
They must count the baggage all over again.
A pack and a sack, an umbrella for rain,
A satchel as thin as a noodle...
But where is the poodle?

Now right by the tracks they see standing around
An ugly, ferocious, enormous old hound.
They catch him and carry him onto the train
With the pack and the sack, the umbrella for rain,
The satchel as thin as a noodle,
Instead of the poodle.

With everything packed, the train's soon underway.
It rides through the night and it rides through the day.
Arriving, at last, at her destination,
"I want," says Madame to the man at the station,
"My pack and my sack, my umbrella for rain,
My satchel as thin as a noodle,
But most of all, if you please,
My dear little poodle."

Then suddenly up on her head with a bound
Jumps that ugly, ferocious, enormous old hound.
The lady screams, "Murderers! Thieves!
This isn't my dog! I'll call the police!"
The baggageman answers, "Of course it's your pet!
Please let me explain before getting upset.
Your doggie ate well while he rode on our train,
And that's how your poodle
Became a GREAT DANE!"

* This poem was translated into Yiddish from an original verse which appeared in a Russian Jewish children's magazine. Kadia Molodowska did the translation. I have been unable to locate the original version or the name of the original poet.

Die Dame mitn Hint'l

Mit a groisen bagazh kumt a dame tzum bahn:
A pekl, a zekl, a klein tchemodan,
A shachtele grois vie a pint'l
Un datzu a klein hint'l.

A man mit a blech oif'n hit'l
Hot gegeben a grienem gestempltn kvitl.
Die bahn giet a feif un nemt fahr'n,
Dos hint'l a shprung--un farlorn.

'svert a gratchke a raash
Un men zeilt dem bagazh:
A pekl, a zekl, a klein tchemodan,
A shachtele grois vie a pint'l
Aber voo is dos hint'l?

Een der seit shteit sich a hunt:
A groiser, a beizer, a pood mit a foont.
Men git eem a nem un a trog oif'n bahn,
Tzum pekl, zum zekl, zum kleinem tchemodan,
Tzum shachtele grois vie a pint'l
Oif'n ort fun kleinem hint'l.

Farhackt un farpackt drei necht un drei teg
Men fort un men fort altz in veg.
Dernoch kumt die dame tzugain mit kurazh:
"Giet mir aher mein ganzen bagazh:
A pekl, a zekl, a klein tchemodan,
A shachtele grois vie a pint'l
Un a klein hint'l."

Giet a shprung oif'n kop ir a hunt,
A groiser, a beizer, a pood mit a foont.
Giet die dame a shrei:
"Gazlen! Roitzeiach! Dos is mein hunt?
...ot hob ich a kvit'l...!"
Zogt der man mit dem hit'l:
"Sha...shtiller, baruight sich, Madame.
Drei teg un drei necht
Zeit ihr gefohren in bahn?
Dos hint'l--kein eine hore--gegesen
Fleish, a pood mit a foont.
Fun kleinem hint'l gevorn a groise hunt."

* A "pood" is a Slavic measure equalling thirty-two pounds.

The poem relys on contrast between "hunt," a dog, and its diminutive "hint'l." Poodles and Great Danes are not mentioned, but the picture is the same.

-MESSAGE POEMS-

The Shoemaker

Yankel's daddy, bent and grey,
Makes fine shoes the livelong day.
Black and brown, for me and you.
But his own, and Yankel's too,
Are battered, torn and hardly new.

* The English version does not convey the bitterness of the original.

Der Shuster

Yankel's tateh iz a shuster.
Ayngeboigen un shtentzik huster.
Macht er sheine, broine, shvartze shikh.
Nur fur Yankel'n un fur zich
Macht Yankel's tateh keine shikh.

* "Shtentzik hust er" means he has a wracking cough. The implication is that he has tuberculosis, a common disease in the crowded conditions in which the working class lived.

Uncle Itche

My dear old Uncle Itche
Studied tailoring.
He takes old clothes and makes them
New as buds in spring.

He comes into a village
With a needle and a pin.
Hangs aloft his little sign:
"Clothing Fixed Within."

And when one town is all patched up
His short stay there is ended.
On to the next. And that is how
He keeps the county mended.

* The Zionists and Socialists emphasized the dignity of manual labor. This tailor is an admirable character with an important social function. Peasants depended on itinerant Jewish tailors to keep their clothes fixed.

Feter Itche

's hot zich Feter Itche
Oisgelernt shneiderei.
Makt er alter klayder
Punkt vie shpugl nei!

Kumt er in a derfl an
Mit der nodl fodim
Henkt er ois a shilderle
"Daw faricht men begodim!"

Ois gelotevet ein dorf,
Gayt er in ein tzvaiten.
Biz erlost arois fun hant
Dem gegent abaneiten.

* The poet, Berel Katzenelson, was an important Zionist leader who emigrated to Israel in the early part of the century. He is also the author of "The Shoemaker."
The word "begodim" is an ironic touch. It means "clothes" in Hebrew, and is used in place of the more common word "klayder." Hebrew words imply a 'high-class' touch when used in Yiddish. A brand new tuxedo would be "begodim," definitely not the peasant clothes Uncle Itche is patching.

The Captive Bird

A little boy went walking
On a summer day so bright.
He caught a sparrow in his hands
And held it oh so tight!

"Have pity on me, Little Boy!
Let me, let me fly!
To the forests, to the fields
Beneath the summer sky."
Tra-la-la

"You are caught, my little bird.
I will not set you free.
I'll build a nest of grass and down
And you will stay with me.
A lovely nest of snow white down.
I'll feed you tender grain.
But as for forests and for fields,
You won't see them again."
Tra-la-la

"Oh, have pity, Little Boy!
My mama is alone.
How she will weep, my mama dear,
When I do not come home!"
Tra-la-la

The little child's heart was moved.
A mama's tears he knew.
"Come! Go and fly, my little bird,
And I shall fly with you!"
Tra-la-la

A Yingele

Gegangen iz a yingele
In vald tzevishen zangen
Un hot er a kleines faygele
A shvelbele gefangen.

"Hob rakhmones, Yingele!
Loz mir, loz mir flien!
In feldele, in valdele
Vu die blumen blien."
Tra-la-la

"Du bis gefangen, Faygele.
Ich vil dir nisht oplozen.
Ich macht fur dir a nestele
Fun federn un grozen,
Fun federlach, fun veikhenke.
Ich vil dir brengen essen.
Dos feldele, dos valdele
Du magst es shoin fergessen."
Tra-la-la

"Oi, hob rakhmones, Yingele.
Ich hob an alte mama
Un veinen vet die mamashi
Ven ich vil zich farzamen."
Tra-la-la

Rakhmones hot dos yingele
Oif treren fun a mama's.
"Nu, fliezhe, fliezhe Faygele
Un ich mit dir tzuzamen!"
Tra-la-la

Yankel the Hunter

Yankel is a hunter, so
To the woods he has to go,
A bear to shoot, a great big one.
But first, you know, he needs a gun.
The closet door is open wide
And he sees Mama's broom inside.
That broom will make a perfect gun.
He'll shoot the bear and watch him run.
But just before he's ready to,
The broom falls down and he falls too.
No bear, no rabbit lying dead.
A bloody nose he got instead!
He won't go hunting. Not today.
Home is where he'd better stay.

* Jewish culture looks down on hunting. Because of the ritual laws of Kashruth, game cannot be eaten. Hunting is therefore a cruel activity with no practical purpose. Wanting to be a hunter is not something a Jewish boy like Yankel should do.

Der Yayger Yankel

Yankel vil a yayger zein.
Yankel vil in vald arein.
Shiesen vil er nor a behr,
Oder vu nemt er gevehr?
Yankel zeht a bayzem
In vinkel shtein.
Mit dem bayzem vet er yogn
Un a groisen behr geshlogn.
Er ken in tzimmer nisht mehr bleiben.
Er vil dem bayzem oifheiben.
Shvere bayzem kert zich iber,
Unzer yayger falt ariber.
Nisht a behr un nisht a hoiz,
Nur tzubrochen hot er zich die noiz.
Er vil nisht mehr kein yayger zein.
Er vil nisht mehr in vald arein.

* The rhythms imply a marching beat. Many of the sentences use a structure more German than Yiddish. The whole poem is very reminiscent of Hoffman's Der Struwelpeter. Perhaps the poet is saying something about Germans as well, whom Eastern Jews generally admired as modern and civilized in contrast to their Slavic neighbors.

-VISIONARY POEMS-

Sarah in the Woods

Sarah to the woods has gone
To pick the pretty flowers.
All around the treer stand still.
She talks to them for hours.
"Tell me, tell me, my dear Tree,
How long you think my life will be."

"A hundred times a hundred score."

"Thank you, Tree, for evermore."

* These last two poems are very strange. Sarah, ironically, is not going to live long. The two frogs sense the coming of winter. Perhaps the poets who wrote them had a premonition of the end.

Sure in Vald

Surele iz in vald avek.
Heissen blumen a buket.
In vald die boimer shtayen shtil.
Vent zich Surele mit a bikashele tzu zay,
"Zog zhe boimele tzu mein,
Vifel vet mein leben zein?"

"Fuftzik, hundret, tauzend yor."

"Ich dank dir boimele, gantz klor."

Two Frogs

By a river, on a stone,
Two green frogs sit all alone.
Oh, such fine fat frogs are they!
This is what they say:
"Croak, croak, croak!
The wind is getting stronger.
Croak, croak, croak!
It won't be summer longer.
Goodbye, Summer. Hello, Fall.
What a strange world after all."

Tzvai Zhabkes

Nebn taykhel oif a shtein
Zitzen zhabkes, tzvai alein.
Feine, dicke zhabkes tzvai
Un zai reden zich azoi,
"Kva, kva, kva.
Es vert shoin kalt.
Hot iz shoin ois zumer bald.
Ois zumer, kva, kva, kva.
Sar a modne velt aza!"